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The Displacement and Relief of Chiang Kai-shek's 'Righteous Compatriots' in the Global Cold War

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Abstract

During the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, Chiang Kai-shek ordered the evacuation of 18,000 local fishermen and their families from the Dachen and other offshore islands in Zhejiang Province. The resettlement to Taiwan was assisted by the US Seventh Fleet. In mainstream historiography, the evacuation is treated as an unimportant sideshow to the Strait Crisis. Little is known about the people who were displaced. This study explores the experiences of Dachen refugees using recently declassified archival documents and oral history. It argues that, despite the refugees being praised as model anti-communist citizens or 'righteous compatriots' by the Nationalists, the Nationalist-US resettlement programme in Taiwan failed miserably, due to its 'wartime developmentalist logic'. The logic considered displaced people not as deprived human beings who needed assistance but as human resources to be utilized by the state for developing sparsely populated regions. This article also argues that the Dachen refugees were not just powerless victims of powerful nation-states. They were active agents in their own story, trying to make the best of difficult circumstances by constantly protesting and petitioning for better treatment. In doing so, they took advantage of their special status as Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's 'righteous compatriots'.

I
In early March 1955, the Red Cross Society of China sent a fact-finding mission to the Dachen Islands (大陳島), off the central and southern coast of Zhejiang Province (Figure 1). The mission, sponsored by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing, travelled to the islands to investigate the 'war crimes' committed by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist (Kuomintang, KMT) forces and Chiang's imperialist American ally. During the three-week tour, the fifty-one-member team took photos of deserted homes and bombed-out villages. They interviewed two dozen or so survivors and selected witnesses from the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which had stormed the empty islands following the Nationalist withdrawal with US assistance. The Chinese Red Cross Society report filed in early April described Nationalist military occupation of the Dachens and several neighbouring islands as a 'catastrophe' (浩劫) for the local civilians. The generalissimo's order to

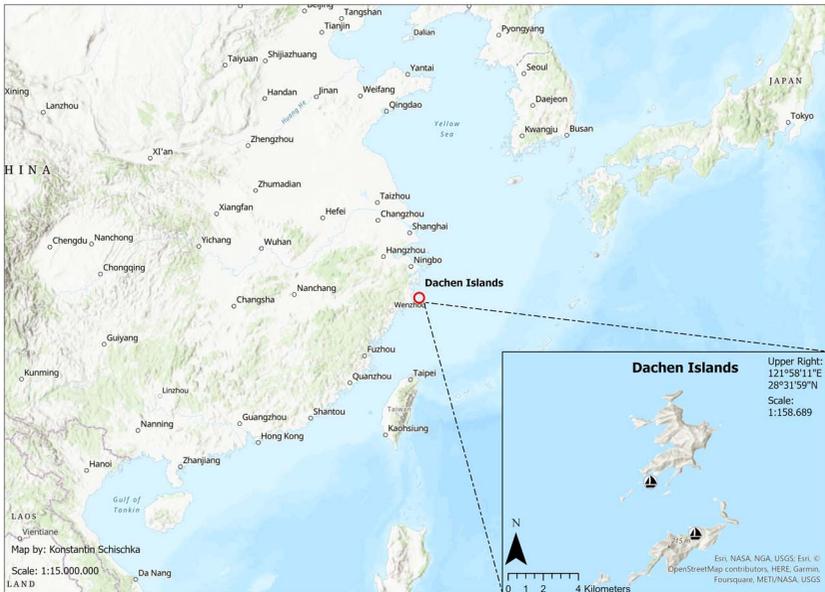


Figure 1. Map of the Dachen Islands.

ship all the island residents to Taiwan was portrayed as a ruthless act of ‘mass abduction’ (劫運). From the Chinese Communist perspective, the hapless local fishermen and their families were taken against their will. In the CCP propaganda language, this was a serious crime perpetrated against the people of China by Chiang’s treacherous and counter-revolutionary mob, and the Americans were their accomplices.¹ Viewed from this perspective, the Dachen islanders were victims of the KMT state violence sponsored by American neocolonialism in Asia.

Meanwhile, the Nationalists in Taiwan celebrated the evacuation from Zhejiang not only as a well-executed strategic withdrawal during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954–5) but more importantly as a humanitarian rescue mission. In an attempt to turn their military setback and humiliation into a moral victory, they lauded the roughly 18,000 displaced islanders as ‘righteous compatriots’ (義胞). In his famous ‘address to the Chinese nation’ following the loss of the Zhejiang offshore islands, Chiang Kai-shek praised the Dachen refugees for their ‘righteous act’ of abandoning home and following his army to Taiwan.² According to Chiang, these humble seafaring folk refused to live under the thumb of Chinese Communist tyranny.³

¹Zhongguo hongshishi zonghui, *Dachen haojie (Dachen catastrophe)* (Beijing, 1955), pp. 6–13.

²For Chiang’s public address, see ‘Guojun zhuan yi zengfang jinma gonggu taipeng zhunbei fangong zongtong wei Dachen chetui bogao quanguo junmin’ (‘The Nationalist army moving (from Dachen) to reinforce Quemoy and Matsu, bolstering defence for Taiwan and Penghu and preparing for the counter-attack: the president’s broadcast to the nation’s army and people’), *Lianhe bao (United Daily News)*, 8 Feb. 1955, p. 1.

³For more on people’s natural turn towards ‘benevolence’, see Chen Jen-ho, ed., *Minzhi quiren (The 18,000 freedom-seekers)* (Taipei, 1975).

The generalissimo also asserted that American assistance in the Dachen evacuation demonstrated solid friendship between two democratic allies – the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan and the United States – in the global struggle against communism.⁴

The KMT and the CCP both used the Dachen refugees in their Cold War rhetoric against each other, to delegitimize the other side's political sovereignty over land and people. Which version of the story is closer to reality? Who were the Dachen people? How did they become Cold War refugees? How did the unfinished Chinese Civil War and the global Cold War affect their lives? Why did this small and seemingly insignificant group of displaced people become 'righteous compatriots', that is, model citizens in a post-Second World War Chinese dictatorial state that had lost a civil war and gone into exile itself? What happened after these Zhejiang fishing folk arrived in Taiwan?

There is a wealth of scholarship on the international diplomacy and nuclear brinkmanship surrounding the First Taiwan Strait Crisis.⁵ By contrast, little is known about the 18,000 human beings who were displaced during that time. In democratized Taiwan, it has only been in the past decade that scholars have begun to pay attention to the Dachen migrant experience.⁶ In China, the focus remains on the military history of the Dachen campaign.⁷ This lacuna reflects the lingering effect of traditional Cold War historiography's overemphasis on geopolitics and international relations at the expense of social and cultural history.⁸ It also illuminates the legal

⁴'Guojun zhuanqi zengfang jinma', p. 1.

⁵For examples, see Shu Guang Zhang, *Deterrence and strategic culture: Chinese-American confrontations, 1949-1958* (Ithaca, NY, 1992), ch. 7; Chang Su-ya, 'Anlihui tinghuo an: meiguo yingfu taihai weiji celue zhiyi' ('UN Security Council ceasefire proposal: one of the American strategies in handling the First Taiwan Strait Crisis'), *Zhongguo yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan* (Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica), 22, no. 2 (1993), pp. 61–106; Robert Accinelli, *Crisis and commitment: United States policy toward Taiwan, 1950-1955* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), chs. 8–11; Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001), ch. 7; Steve Tsang, *The Cold War's odd couple: the unintended partnership between the Republic of China and the UK, 1950-1958* (London, 2005), ch. 5; Chou Hsiang-hua, *Yiwang de weiji: diyici taihai weiji de zhenxiang* (*The forgotten crisis: the truth about the First Taiwan Strait Crisis*) (Taipei, 2008); Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Strait talk: United States-Taiwan relations and the crisis with China* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), pp. 13–17; Bruce A. Elleman, *Taiwan Straits: crisis in Asia and the role of the U.S. navy* (Lanham, MD, 2015), ch. 5; Hsiao-ting Lin, *Accidental state: Chiang Kai-shek, the United States, and the making of Taiwan* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), pp. 226–40.

⁶Ko Kai-pei, 'Dachencun wenhua: xingcheng, shenghuo jingyan yu jiti jiyi' ('Dachen village culture: formation, lived experience, and collective memory'), in Chang Han-pi, ed., *Fusanghua yu jiayuan xiangxiang* (*Hibiscus and imaging home*) (Taipei, 2011), pp. 143–83; Chen Wei-hua and Chang Mau-kuei, 'Cong Dachen yibao dao Dachencun: shehui leishu de shengcheng zhuanbian yu yiyi' ('From Dachen righteous compatriots to Dachen people: the formation and transformation of a social category and its meaning'), *Taiwan shehuixue* (*Taiwanese Sociology*) (2014), pp. 51–95; Chen Ling, *Dachen jiyi: liangbian xinyimin de beihuan* (*Dachen memories: joys and sorrows of new immigrants on both sides of the Taiwan Strait*) (Taipei, 2015); Chou Hsiu-hui, *Cijin de Dachen xincun: lishi bianqian yu rentong* (*The Dachen new village in Cijin: historical transformation and identity*) (Kaohsiung, 2018).

⁷Liu Tong, *Kuahai zhi zhan: Jinmen, Hainan, Yijiangshan* (*Wars across the sea: Jinmen, Hainan, Yijiangshan*) (Beijing, 2010); Hu Shihong, ed., *Zhancheng qinli zhe shuo: Yijiangshan dao zhi zhan* (*War testimonies: the battle for Yijiangshan*) (Shanghai, 2005).

⁸Michael Szonyi and Hong Liu, 'Introduction: new approaches to the study of the Cold War in Asia', in Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi, eds., *The Cold War in Asia: the battle for hearts and minds* (Leiden, 2010), pp. 1–11.

and institutional biases associated with the post-Second World War international refugee regime based primarily in Europe. Rebecca Nedostup points to ‘the absence of ethnic Chinese refugees outside of colonial settings’ from the records of the so-called ‘international’ refugee regime.⁹ Communities displaced by wars in China and Taiwan in the mid-twentieth century have largely been overlooked and underrepresented in world history due to these biases. Peter Gatrell suggests that one of the pitfalls of writing a refugee-centred history is assuming ‘the homogeneity of “experience”’.¹⁰ Human suffering due to involuntary displacement is universal. Yet every refugee story is unique and deserves attention in its own right.

Most of the Dachen evacuees were uneducated coastal fishermen. They seemed relatively powerless against the Nationalists and their American ally, whose actions in the Cold War contributed to the destruction of their home islands and their involuntary displacement to Taiwan. Yet the Dachen story epitomizes the concept of ‘the refugee political’ articulated by Milinda Banerjee and Kerstin von Lingen in their introduction to this special issue. It also resonates with works by other scholars in this collection. Granted, the Zhejiang fisherman families were not writers, entrepreneurs, or intellectuals living in exile; they were not worldly and sophisticated people. They were not the European elites in Japanese-occupied China in Matthew Craig’s study, the Baltic German aristocrats of Dina Gusejnova’s research, or the exiled Jewish intellectuals in Sebastian Musch’s and Philipp Strobl’s articles. The Dachen migrants nevertheless possessed the ability to become the ‘political beings’ defined by Banerjee and von Lingen in the introduction. When the Nationalist–American joint resettlement and vocational training projects in Taiwan’s countryside failed miserably in the late 1950s and early ’60s, the refugees protested, petitioned, and took collective actions. Dachen migrants leveraged their special status as model anti-communist citizens in Chiang Kai-shek’s ‘Free China’, using it to put pressure on the authorities to improve their lives. The refugee actions later contributed to the establishment of the Dachen professional seamen training programme by the Nationalist regime. This programme vastly improved the lives of refugee families and facilitated some of their migration to the United States in the 1970s and ’80s.

Rana Mitter has shown that massive human displacement was one of the defining factors that contributed to the social and political disintegration of Nationalist China on the mainland during the late 1940s.¹¹ In early 1950s Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek’s displaced regime continued to face significant challenges produced by massive influxes of deserted soldiers and dispossessed mainland refugees.¹² The KMT strategy for resettling and ‘rehabilitating’ the Dachen refugees stemmed from

⁹Rebecca Nedostup, ‘Burying, repatriating and leaving the dead in wartime and postwar China and Taiwan, 1937–1955’, *Journal of Chinese History*, 1, no. 1 (2017), pp. 111–39, at p. 115.

¹⁰Peter Gatrell, *The making of the modern refugee* (Oxford, 2015), p. xi.

¹¹Rana Mitter, ‘Relocation and dislocation: civilian, refugee, and military movement as factors in the disintegration of postwar China, 1945–49’, *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46, no. 2 (2022), pp. 193–213.

¹²I discuss these issues in Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang, *The great exodus from China: trauma, memory, and identity in modern Taiwan* (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 66–84.

a form of exploitative developmental thinking. This thinking was forged by prolonged military conflict; I call it 'wartime developmentalist logic'. In her own article in this special issue, Shuvatri Dasgupta demonstrates that a similar Second World War-era developmentalist logic was used by the early postcolonial Indian state to make 'productive use' of Partition refugees. The state brushed aside communal, co-operative relief efforts led by progressive and socialist-minded female activists working from the grassroots: efforts that the government deemed politically questionable, impractical, or non-cost-effective, much to the detriment of the refugees.

This wartime developmentalist logic is different from the high-level, elitist modernization efforts by the KMT examined by William Kirby and J. Megan Greene – efforts that promoted science, engineering, and economic growth during the Nanjing decade (1928–37), and later on contributed to the 'Taiwan miracle' of the 1980s.¹³ Rather, the Nationalist wartime developmentalist thinking in the 1950s and early '60s was applied to the resettling of lower-class mainland refugees, many of whom were discharged foot soldiers. The KMT used the retired veterans to build infrastructure and set up collective farms in the mountains and in the underdeveloped east of Taiwan. These programmes were ad hoc and exploitative. In a similar manner, the Nationalists treated dispossessed, illiterate, and destitute Zhejiang islanders as cheap human resources to develop Taiwan's marginal and sparsely populated regions. As we will see, wartime developmentalist logic contributed to the failure of the Dachen new village projects.

Banerjee and von Lingen have proposed a framework that intersects subaltern histories with transnational histories, putting an emphasis on subaltern agency in global history as opposed to seeing everything through the lens of high-level politics, diplomacy, and international organizations.¹⁴ Affirming this framework, this study shows that the Dachen people were not just pitiable victims or mindless pawns of nation-states at war. They were active agents in their own story, trying to make the best of difficult and overwhelming circumstances, trying to make life better for their families. Gatrell submits that 'Refugees were (and are) regularly forced to live in extreme conditions, without necessarily being deprived of the capacity to exercise a degree of control over their own lives.'¹⁵ The story told in the following pages resonates with this statement.

II

In 1949, the Chinese Communists defeated the Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War. The remnants of the Nationalist/ROC government and military fled to Taiwan, while the CCP established the People's Republic of China (PRC). Initially, the United

¹³William Kirby, 'Engineering China: birth of the developmental state, 1928–1937', in Wen-hsin Yeh, ed., *Becoming Chinese: passages to modernity and beyond* (Berkeley, CA, 2000), pp. 137–60; J. Megan Greene, *The origins of the developmental state in Taiwan: science policy and the quest for modernization* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

¹⁴Milinda Banerjee and Kerstin von Lingen, 'Forced migration and refugee resettlement in the long 1940s: an introduction to its connected and global history', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46, no. 2 (2022), pp. 185–92.

¹⁵Gatrell, *Making of the modern refugee*, p. 9.

States, even with its embargoes against the PRC, sought to disengage Chiang Kai-shek's overthrown regime and mended fences with the newly formed communist state. However, when the Korean War broke out in late June 1950, President Truman ordered the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait to 'neutralize' the Chinese Civil War and prevent further escalation of military conflict in the region. In October 1950, Chinese Communist troops, under the guise of a 'volunteer army', crossed the Yalu river and drove the US-led UN forces out of North Korea. From this point onwards, Washington resumed its military support and economic aid for the Nationalists in Taiwan. This was the general situation in the Taiwan Strait during the early 1950s.

With the main theatre of war in East Asia now having shifted north to the Korean peninsula, the KMT and the CCP continued to fight on other fronts. The movement of people – or, more specifically, people voting with their feet – became one of the main areas of contestation. One prominent issue that emerged in the early 1950s was the Hong Kong refugee crisis: hundreds of thousands of mainland refugees leaving Communist China for the tiny British colony of Hong Kong. This intricate story has been told by Chi-Kwan Mark, Glen Peterson, Meredith Oyen, Madeline Y. Hsu, and Laura Madokoro.¹⁶ Peterson neatly sums up the situation. The Hong Kong refugee issue:

involved a British government determined to preserve its colonial authority and minimise what it regarded as UNHCR meddling in Hong Kong; a UNHCR that was equally eager to set up shop in Hong Kong and to use the refugee crisis as a means for garnering U.S. support and funding; a U.S. government anxious to discredit communist influence and expansion but dismissive of the UNHCR and determined to avoid costly refugee relief operations; a private U.S. agency anxious to assist only certain refugees; a Republic of China [Nationalist Taiwan] bent on embarrassing the communist government by exposing the refugee crisis but eager to help only a few; a PRC ready to exploit the refugees' misery in order to discredit the British and Hong Kong authorities ...¹⁷

The circumstances were, of course, different for the Dachen migration. Unlike Hong Kong, none of the UNHCR, the British, private NGOs, or religious groups were part of the overall picture. The PRC could do little beyond verbal condemnations to stop the Nationalist–American joint operation from evacuating and resettling the Zhejiang island refugees to Taiwan. That said, the use of displaced people's misery for political purposes by competing states at the expense of the actual relief work and the refugees themselves remains the same. During the Cold War, displaced peoples served as a litmus test for asserting political sovereignty and regime legitimacy. The

¹⁶Chi-Kwan Mark, 'The "problem of people": British colonials, Cold War powers, and the Chinese refugees in Hong Kong, 1949–62', *Modern Asian Studies*, 41, no. 6 (2007), pp. 1145–81; Glen Peterson, 'To be or not to be a refugee: the international politics of the Hong Kong refugee crisis, 1949–55', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36, no. 2 (2008), pp. 171–95; Meredith Oyen, *The diplomacy of migration: transnational lives and the making of U.S.–Chinese relations in the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2015), ch. 6; Madeline Y. Hsu, 'Aid Refugee Chinese Intellectuals, Inc. and the political uses of humanitarian relief, 1952–1962', *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 10, no. 2 (2014), pp. 137–64; Laura Madokoro, *Elusive refuge: Chinese migrants in the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

¹⁷Peterson, 'To be or not to be a refugee', p. 184.

movement of people became an integral part of the propaganda war between the KMT and the CCP.

A somewhat comparable population movement was the 14,000 Chinese People's Volunteer Army POWs captured by UN forces during the Korean War. The official Nationalist propaganda glorified these individuals as 'anti-communist heroes' (反共義士). These captured or surrendered Chinese Communist soldiers did not want to be repatriated back to the PRC. Instead, they asked to be shipped to 'Free China' (Taiwan).¹⁸ Chiang Kai-shek considered the arrival of 14,000 Chinese POWs in Taiwan in late January 1954 as a great morale booster, a win for his regime. The generalissimo noted in his diary that the event was 'a significant psychological victory' in the struggle against global communism following a series of demoralizing setbacks.¹⁹ The Nationalists held huge celebrations for the 'anti-communist heroes' and paraded them around in Taiwan. They also arranged for some of these 'heroes' to go on publicity tours around the world to denounce the PRC.²⁰ The day of their landing in Taiwan was designated as a national holiday called the 'Freedom Day' (自由日).

For the KMT, the POWs were outstanding soldiers and model citizens because they elected not to return to the PRC, 'choosing freedom' instead. In reality, many were enticed, coerced, or intimidated by developments in the POW camps to choose Taiwan.²¹ As we will see later, the Dachen islanders were similarly given no choice. The extensive PLA bombing laid waste their homelands, making it hard to survive. More importantly, Chiang Kai-shek gave a strict order to evacuate everyone from the Zhejiang islands to Taiwan.

The Dachen islanders were transported to Taiwan in February 1955, roughly a year after the arrival of the 'anti-communist heroes' from Korea. Like the Korean War POWs, the island residents from coastal Zhejiang were deemed a very special group of people by the Nationalists – 'the righteous compatriots'. In the KMT propaganda story, the Dachen people refused to live under the Chinese Communist tyranny. They 'chose freedom' by leaving their homes, abandoning their ancestral graves, and burning their fishing boats. They made great sacrifices so that they could 'follow President Chiang to Taiwan'.²² The KMT celebrated the arrival of Dachen refugees as they had done the arrival of the POWs from Korea the previous year. Large welcoming parties were staged; official institutions and civilian organizations were mobilized to start donation drives for the Dachen relief programme; refugees received visits and gifts from Madame Chiang and other KMT luminaries; and a few selected refugee representatives were even granted an audience with the

¹⁸For more, see David Cheng Chang, *The hijacked war: the story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War* (Stanford, CA, 2020); Shen Hsing-yi, *Yiwan siqian ge zhengren: hanzhan shiqi 'fangong yishi' zhi yanjiu* (Fourteen thousand witnesses: a study of the 'anti-communist heroes' during the Korean War) (Taipei, 2013).

¹⁹Chang, *Hijacked war*, p. 6.

²⁰Shen, *Yiwan siqian ge zhengren*, pp. 250–69.

²¹For details on the trials and tribulations of the POWs and the struggle between pro-KMT and pro-CCP prisoners, see Shen, *Yiwan siqian ge zhengren*, pp. 163–90.

²²'Dachen yibao shangshu zongtong shishen yonghu zhengfu juexin' ('Dachen righteous compatriots submitted a letter to the president. They vowed to support the government'), *Zhongyang ribao* (Central Daily), 10 Feb. 1955, p. 1.

generalissimo.²³ While the Korean War POWs were common soldiers, the Zhejiang evacuees were humble fishermen and their families. The idea that ordinary working people – that is, the main CCP support base – had thrown in their lot with the Nationalists constituted a powerful counter-narrative to the Chinese Communist claim to speak for the downtrodden masses.

For Chiang Kai-shek's American ally and sponsor, too, the relocation of Zhejiang islanders had considerable propaganda value. It represented yet another instance of freedom-loving people fleeing communist dictatorship. The Americans thus had a stake in the success of the Dachen resettlement. They in fact paid for most of the evacuees' new housing and vocational training projects in Taiwan. In the internal correspondence between US and KMT aid officials, the Dachen refugees were compared to anti-communist exiles from Hungary and East Germany.²⁴

In 1955, the US aid office in Taipei stated that the Dachen resettlement programme 'intends to illustrate to those enslaved by communism that people who choose the free way of life can build a better life through their own efforts under the guidance of free governments concerned for their livelihood'.²⁵ Free China was, of course, not really free. The joint effort by the two 'free governments' to assist the transplanted Zhejiang islanders would end up failing miserably, due to the aforementioned 'wartime developmentalist logic'. That logic treated displaced people not as traumatized or deprived human beings who needed support and assistance, but as human resources to be utilized by the state to open up marginal lands. Before getting to this part of the story, however, we need to first examine historical developments in the coastal region of central and southern Zhejiang in the early 1950s. This history traces the origin of US involvement with the Dachen issue. It also answers two important questions: who were the Dachen people and how did they become Cold War refugees?

III

Before the Chinese Civil War came to the central and southern coast of Zhejiang, state control of the Zhejiang offshore islands was weak. Most of the islanders were fishermen and seafaring traders with little formal education. The local residents formed militias and armed flotillas to defend their maritime trade and autonomy against government authorities on the mainland, and against Japanese occupation during the Second World War. In *The art of not being governed*, James Scott has illuminated and popularized the 'anarchist history' of diverse communities living in the

²³Chen, *Minzhi guiren*, pp. 82–8, 99–111; 'Keelung gang zuo chongjian weida changmian Dachen yibao dabu dantai quanguo chaoye relie huanying' ('Another great scene was witnessed at Keelung Harbor yesterday. Most of the Dachen righteous compatriots had arrived. The entire nation welcomed them with enthusiasm'), *Zhongyang ribao*, 10 Feb. 1955, p. 1; 'Jieyi tuishi huiji tongbao gejie fenxie yiwu weiwen Dachen yimin' ('Donating clothes and food to benefit fellow nationals. People from different walks of life brought clothing to comfort the Dachen righteous people'), *Zhongyang ribao*, 13 Feb. 1955, p. 4.

²⁴Council for International Economic Cooperation and Development (CIECD), 'Dachen yibao anzhi jihua zongjiao' ('The plan to resettle Dachen righteous compatriots, total volume'), 1955–8, Institute of Modern History Archives, Academia Sinica, Taipei (IMHA), 36-18-004-039, p. 18.

²⁵'Dachen diqu laitai yibao fudao jihua' ('The plans to assist righteous compatriots who arrived in Taiwan from the Dachen region'), 25 Apr. 1955, Academia Historica (Guoshiguan), Taipei (AH), 006-010704-00047-007, p. 27.

Southeast Asian highlands, and Michael Szonyi shows that dynamics of resistance and negotiation between the south-east maritime residents and China's imperial state had existed since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).²⁶ In the first half of the twentieth century, community leaders of the Zhejiang coast, merchant families that commanded small armed flotillas, engaged in piracy and the trafficking of opium. They fought among themselves, demarcated turfs, and were able to negotiate a sort of symbiotic co-existence with the intruding authorities from the mainland. For the most part, the islanders governed themselves. They thrived on fishing, smuggling, and seafood trade with the mainland.²⁷ But a chain of events drew them into the civil war and the ensuing global Cold War.

In May 1950, the Nationalist army evacuated roughly 120,000 army personnel and 20,000 civilians to Taiwan from the Zhoushan Islands (舟山群島) near the city of Ningbo in northern Zhejiang.²⁸ The KMT supporters who were left behind partnered with local Zhejiang pirates, fishermen, and armed merchant fleets to form anti-CCP guerrilla forces. These independent squadrons of fishing junks and small merchant vessels, each with a self-appointed commander, moved south to occupy a number of strategic islands in central and southern Zhejiang.

Roughly twenty Zhejiang offshore islands were occupied by thirty or so anti-CCP guerrilla groups with a combined strength of about 10,000 fighting men.²⁹ The two main Dachen Islands located at the centre of the archipelago – Upper Dachen Island (roughly 7 square kilometres) and Lower Dachen Island (about 5 square kilometres) – were the largest land masses and guerrilla bases. The Dachens were also home to the majority of the population, numbering approximately 14,300 in 1951, with roughly 2,000 families.³⁰ In addition, there were a couple of thousand people living in fishing villages scattered across neighbouring small islands.

When the Korean War broke out, the Americans and the Nationalists began to send army and intelligence personnel to Dachen and the Zhejiang islands to reorganize and take control of the guerrilla forces. They did this for two reasons: to enforce their trade embargoes against the PRC and to tie down the PLA forces in the south so that more could not be sent north to Korea.³¹ American operatives, many

²⁶James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT, 2009); Michael Szonyi, *The art of being governed: everyday politics in late imperial China* (Princeton, NJ, 2017).

²⁷For more, see Chen Jen-ho, Ma Chih-chien, and Lin Chih-ming, 'Cong Dachen dao Taiwan: Dachen dao de lishi yu qianxi' ('From the Dachen Islands to Taiwan: the history and migration of Dachen islanders'), *Yilan wenxian (Yilan Documents)*, 30 (1997), pp. 108–24, at pp. 113–15.

²⁸For more on the Nationalist withdrawal from the Zhoushan Islands, see Chen Ling, *Zhoushan chetui jimi dangan: liushinian qian de yiye cansang (Zhoushan withdrawal secret files: a page of history from sixty years ago)* (Taipei, 2010).

²⁹Kuo Ting-yee et al., *Wang Wei xiansheng fangwen jilu (The reminiscences of General Wang Wei)* (Taipei, 1996), p. 125. For a list of the main groups, their locations, and the names of the commanders, see Xingzhengyuan, 'Chin Tung-chang Dachen diqu shicha baogao ji Zhejiang fangong jiuguojun zongzhi-huibu jianyi shixiang' ('Report and recommendations from Chin Tung-chang's inspection of the Dachen region and the Zhejiang Anti-Communist Salvation Army headquarters'), 1951–2, AH, 014-010200-0105, p. 14.

³⁰Xingzhengyuan, 'Chin Tung-chang Dachen diqu', p. 20.

³¹Kuo et al., *Wang Wei xiansheng fangwen jilu*, pp. 121–4.

of them Second World War veteran commandos, arrived under the guise of a 'private' company funded by the CIA called Western Enterprises Incorporated (WEI).³² Meanwhile, Chiang Kai-shek sent one of his most senior and trusted generals, Hu Tsung-nan (胡宗南, 1896–1962), to the Zhejiang front line to direct guerrilla operations and work with the Americans.³³ The WEI provided money, supplies, equipment, weapons, and training. The Americans also helped General Hu and his military officers conduct coastal raids and intelligence-gathering operations, which were carried out on the ground by the fishermen-turned-guerrilla fighters that they recruited locally. This was the start of the Nationalist military occupation of Dachen with US support.

The military occupation and the constant raids launched against the Chinese mainland from the two Dachens and their surrounding islands turned the once lightly governed Zhejiang archipelago into a dangerous and highly militarized war zone. Whereas the islanders could still trade and make contact with the mainland coastal communities before the KMT officials and the CIA operatives arrived, it became increasingly difficult to do so afterwards. The Nationalist sea patrols regularly stopped, searched, or fired on vessels they considered suspicious. The CCP coastguards did the same in retaliation. Both sides seized boats and crews indiscriminately, and abducted local fishing folk from the other side not only for loot but also for intelligence gathering.³⁴

Regular fishing and seafaring trade were brought to a standstill as the KMT military put in place strict regulations on civilian boat movements. The Nationalists forbade the islands' residents from coming into contact with junks or people from the PRC side.³⁵ Visiting relatives or market towns on the mainland, which used to be part of the islanders' daily routine, was strictly prohibited. Not only did the restriction cut the islands' long-standing communal and familial ties with the Chinese mainland. More importantly, it destroyed the once thriving fishing industry and maritime commerce. The offshore islands were small and underdeveloped, with terrain that was too rugged to support agriculture. Before the arrival of the Nationalists and the Americans, despite the guerrilla activities, open sea fishing and trade with the mainland had always been the mainstay of the local economy. With freedom to navigate the sea taken away by the Cold War standoff between the KMT and the CCP, there was widespread pauperization and mass starvation among the islands' inhabitants.³⁶

³²Elleman, *Taiwan Straits*, p. 53. See also Frank Holober, *Raiders of the China coast: CIA covert operations during the Korean War* (Annapolis, MD, 1999), ch. 7.

³³Hu used the alias Chin Tung-chang (秦東昌) while on the Dachen front line.

³⁴For examples, see Dachen fangshouqu silingbu, 'Chengsong Shih jun deng panluan'an' ('Presenting the treason case of Shih and others'), 6 Feb. 1954, National Archives Administration, New Taipei City (NAA), B3750187701/0041/1571/9154/5/010; Xingzhengyuan Zhejiang shengzhengfu, 'Baofang' ('Anti-spying files'), 24 Sept. 1953–17 July 1954, NAA, A300000000A/0042/3-3-3-7/070.

³⁵See the files in Xingzhengyuan, 'Chuanbo guanzhi an' ('The regulation of boats'), 21 Sept. 1954–29 Dec. 1954, NAA, A300000000A/0043/3-3-3-7/226; Ho Cheng-che, 'Dachen guo Taiwan: 1950 niandai xinyimin de gean yanjiu' ('From Dachen to Taiwan: a case study of 1950s new immigrants') (MA thesis, Tamkang University, Taipei, 2005), pp. 23–6.

³⁶For declassified reports on Dachen people's pauperization and starvation, see 'Yizhou shehui diaocha baogao zhaiyao' ('A summary of the week's investigation report'), 30 Aug. 1951, NAA, 0040/zongcai

Being hardy, resourceful, and independent seafaring people, the Zhejiang islanders tried their best to adapt and survive. Some continued to run illegal drug trade and gambling joints. Declassified Nationalist files show that there were numerous government attempts to crack down on this underground economy.³⁷ Some of the residents, such as Chang Hsueh-shou, simply ignored the official ban on sailing to the mainland. Chang took his boat to trade goods in the PRC. Unfortunately, upon returning, he was arrested and charged as a CCP spy by the Nationalist authorities in Dachen. According to Chang's oral testimony, he spent five years in jail. It was not until Taiwan democratized that he was deemed innocent and received official compensation for his suffering.³⁸

Other islanders worked for the KMT. They took on unsavoury roles or high-risk jobs on the front line. The local boatman and former guerrilla crew member Kuan Chu-chu became a village political officer. Reflecting on the experience, Kuan states that his main task was to spy on the other villagers, 'knocking on doors and entering people's homes in the middle of the night to see if they had returned from their fishing trips, and to see if they brought back any Communists (from China)'.³⁹ Prevailing hardship compelled many local boys to seek employment with the Nationalist military. Chang Chi-cheng was only fourteen when he started working for the army as an errand boy. By the age of sixteen, he was given a telegraph machine and ferried out to one of the small outer islands to report on PLA ship movements. It was a dangerous job: many of his peers doing the same thing were captured and executed by the Chinese Communists; some ended up in the PRC's labour camps.⁴⁰

In short, the Nationalist–American occupation of Dachen brought much hardship and suffering to the indigenous population. The Zhejiang islanders had shown great resiliency and adaptability in weathering the hard times nonetheless. The Red Cross Society report presented at the beginning of this study was a piece of Chinese Communist propaganda. Still, one can see that there was some basis to Beijing's accusation of the KMT 'war crimes' in Dachen. That said, this was a continuation of the Chinese Civil War that had supposedly ended on the mainland in 1949. The CCP also detained, interrogated, and executed Dachen residents – those whom they thought were working for the KMT – employing similar population control and surveillance methods on their end of the maritime front line to guard against Nationalist infiltration and attacks.

piqian/001/0003/40-0303, p. 2; Xingzhengyuan, 'Zhejiang ge haidao lianghuang qing shefa yunliang ping-tiao bing fang yudai' ('The Zhejiang islands are experiencing a famine. Please ship grains to level food prices and provide loans for fishermen'), 17 Oct. 1951–18 June 1958, NAA, AA00000000A/0040/8-4-2-8/2.

³⁷Xingzhengyuan, 'Chajinyan jindu juan' ('Banning drugs and gambling'), 28 Nov. 1953–25 Sept. 1954, NAA, A300000000A/0042/3-3-3-7/050.

³⁸Chou, *Cijin de Dachen xincun*, pp. 60–1.

³⁹Ma Chih-chien, 'Kuan Chu-chu xiansheng fangtanlu' ('The interview records of Mr Kuan Chu-chu'), *Yilan wenxian*, 30 (1997), pp. 158–63, at pp. 160–1.

⁴⁰Wang Chuan-ta, ed., *Dachenren zai Taiwan: Dachen qiantai liushi zhounian jinian tekan (Dachen people in Taiwan: a commemorative volume for the sixtieth anniversary of the migration to Taiwan)* (New Taipei City, 2016), p. 206.

IV

Another thing that the Chinese Red Cross Society report failed to acknowledge was that most of the physical destruction on the Zhejiang islands was actually caused by extensive PLA bombing, which started months before the KMT withdrawal in February 1955.⁴¹ The retreating Nationalists and the US marine troops who landed to assist the civilian departure did blow up infrastructure and destroy military equipment and supplies that could not be carried away. But they did not intentionally damage local people's property. Rather, it was the intense air raids launched by the Chinese Communists that reduced large swaths of the islands to smoking ruins.

Following the armistice in Korea in July 1953, CCP leaders decided to refocus their attention on the Taiwan Strait. The American-sponsored hit-and-runs and espionage had been a thorn in the side of the PRC. These activities greatly disrupted regular shipping along the south-eastern coast of the country. With war in the north finally ended, Mao and his military commanders were determined to dislodge the Nationalists from the offshore islands.⁴² In early September 1954, the PLA launched a massive artillery bombardment of Quemoy, another island group held by the KMT further to the south, in coastal Fujian.⁴³ The ensuing conflict along the coastline came to be known as the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. In November 1954, after beating back KMT naval and air forces in central and southern Zhejiang, swarms of PLA bombers began to systematically pummel the Nationalist positions on the offshore islands, and for days on end.⁴⁴ In late January 1955, the KMT stronghold on the small islet of Yijiangshan (一江山) fell to the CCP. The islet was located just a few nautical miles north of the two main Dachen Islands.⁴⁵ It was clear at this point that the defence of the Dachens was impossible without the full commitment of American naval and air power in the region. Washington, however, was in no mood to get involved in another major conflict with the PRC, having just pulled out of Korea. In addition, with the end of the Korean War, the US saw little strategic value in the Zhejiang islands. Thus, with great reluctance, Chiang Kai-shek accepted the offer from the Eisenhower administration to help him evacuate the islands.⁴⁶

Could the locals stay behind if they wanted to do so? The answer was most definitely no. All civilians, whether they liked it or not, would be relocated to Taiwan on Chiang Kai-shek's strict order.⁴⁷ As previously stated, the notion of refugees escaping communist tyranny was a powerful trope in the 'free world's' propaganda against the Soviet bloc. The KMT promoted the displaced Zhejiang islanders as 'righteous compatriots', humble fishing folk who gave up everything to 'seek freedom'. In two swift and well-executed naval operations, roughly 18,000 local civilians and 15,000 military personnel and guerrilla fighters were transported to Taiwan. The Seventh

⁴¹Chen, Ma, and Lin, 'Cong Dachen dao Taiwan', p. 117; 'Wo kongjun chuji Toumen dao ... Dachen riqian beizha pingmin shangwang pozhong' ('Our air force attacked Toumen Island ... Dachen was bombed the day before yesterday. Civilian casualties were quite heavy'), *Zhongyang ribao*, 11 Nov. 1954, p. 1.

⁴²Elleman, *Taiwan Straits*, pp. 59, 62.

⁴³Quemoy is still held by Taiwan today.

⁴⁴Chen, *Dachen jiyi*, pp. 25–7.

⁴⁵Elleman, *Taiwan Straits*, pp. 63–4; Ho, 'Dachen guo Taiwan', pp. 33–7.

⁴⁶Wang, *Dachenren zai Taiwan*, pp. 63–4; Chen, *Dachen jiyi*, pp. 46–8.

⁴⁷Ko Kai-pei describes it as 'a forced relocation of population': see Ko, 'Dachencun wenhua', p. 152.

Fleet provided assistance for the main withdrawal from the two Dachens and nearby islands.⁴⁸

Though the Zhejiang islanders were forced to abandon their homes, their temples, and their ancestors' graves, the shell-shocked evacuees nevertheless breathed a sigh of relief upon reaching Taiwan. They had endured more than two months of intensive aerial bombardment and years of heavy-handed war-zone military administration. People had had their livelihoods taken away. They had constantly lived in fear and on the edge of starvation. Most had practically been living in makeshift air raid shelters prior to the evacuation.⁴⁹ Many thought that their trials and tribulations would finally come to an end in the land of 'Free China'. After all, the Nationalist authorities praised them as 'righteous compatriots', and had promised to help them start a new life in Taiwan.

Alas, the Dachen refugees would be greatly disappointed. Notwithstanding the vaunted rhetoric of free choice and anti-communist camaraderie, the Nationalist–American village resettlement and vocational training projects for the Dachen migrants would yield abysmal results. The failure contributed to abject poverty, social marginalization, and family separation of transplanted Dachen families in just a few years after they arrived in Taiwan. This was despite a total spend of over 131 million NTD (US\$3.2 million), a substantial amount of money in 1950s Taiwan, and mostly funded by American aid.⁵⁰ So what went wrong?

In hindsight, one can say that unrealistic expectations and top-down interference by American aid staff, combined with a dysfunctional Nationalist relief bureaucracy, were important contributing factors to the misery of the Zhejiang migrants. However, the most fundamental reason for the Dachen resettlement fiasco was the wartime developmentalist logic of the Nationalist government. This logic treated uprooted communities not as real people who needed assistance and psychological comfort but as human resources to be utilized by the state. It was this thinking that doomed the entire relief effort from the very beginning.

This wartime developmental logic has its origins in war-torn China during the late 1930s and '40s, where the KMT, the CCP, and various Sino-Japanese occupation regimes struggled for supremacy. The Chinese Civil War and the Japanese invasion uprooted tens of millions of people. The regimes at war saw dispossessed civilians as useful resources to expand their reach and influence. Nedostup aptly sums up the thinking of the Nationalists:

Nationalist government officials on various levels and privately-funded relief organizers advocated the resettlement of rural and sometimes even urban

⁴⁸For the operations, see Elleman, *Taiwan Straits*, pp. 64–5; Ho, 'Dachen guo Taiwan', pp. 42–52. For the number of civilian and military personnel transported, see CIECD, 'Dachen yibao anzhi', 36-18-004-039, p. 512.

⁴⁹Ko, 'Dachencun wenhua', p. 151.

⁵⁰CIECD, 'Dachen yibao anzhi jihua zongjuan' ('The plan to resettle Dachen righteous compatriots, total volume'), 1958–62, IMHA, 36-18-004-040, p. 128. On paper, the American aid programme in Taiwan contributed about 52 per cent of the Dachen relief funds, most of which was used to construct the Dachen new villages. However, a number of Nationalist government agencies involved in the Dachen assistance work were also heavily subsidized by the United States. For a detailed breakdown of the expenses and the agencies involved, see *ibid.*, pp. 104–25.

refugees in agricultural colonies on ostensibly fallow remote land. Such plans, which were executed around the country – from ethnically diverse ‘border regions’ in the north and northwest to eastern locales such as Jiangxi and the southwest KMT base – claimed an economic foundation, but also created a buffer zone of war refugees in the previously politically and militarily unstable inland areas into which KMT forces were now moving.⁵¹

Viewed in this light, refugee resettlement and refugee labour became an integral part of the KMT nation-state-building project in war. The Nationalists were displaced to Taiwan in 1949, but that year did not constitute an absolute historical watershed – far from it. The regime was still at war. The same top-down developmental thinking was brought to the ‘decolonized’ Taiwan, connecting the Second World War administrative legacy in China with the Cold War development on the island.

Taiwan had been a Japanese colony from 1895 to 1945. Though a majority of the local Taiwanese were of ethnic Chinese descent (Hoklo and Hakka), the relationship between the generalissimo’s single-party dictatorship and the island’s pre-1945 residents had not been harmonious.⁵² Many Taiwanese saw the Nationalist officials as a privileged minority of colonizers. The KMT authorities viewed their state-building endeavour in Cold War Taiwan as both an irredentist, anti-communist crusade to reconquer China and a decolonizing effort to ‘re-Sinicize’ the Japanized Taiwanese. For the local Taiwanese, the Nationalist rule was a recolonization process through and through. The Chinese mainland elites simply replaced the Japanese rulers.

The exiled Nationalists needed to gain control of Taiwan’s backcountry and develop the island’s resources for their war to retake the mainland. It is therefore not surprising that the KMT authorities decided to transport most of the Zhejiang evacuees to remote and sparsely populated areas in the counties of Yilan (宜蘭), Hualien (花蓮), Taitung (台東), Pingtung (屏東), and Kaohsiung (高雄), and build new settlements there. In total, thirty-five new Dachen villages were built, almost entirely with US funds. Each village was designated to specialize in one particular type of production or vocation – fishing, farming, handicraft, and small business – depending on their locations.⁵³ The government would provide training, equipment, loans, and startup money to help the migrants become economically self-sufficient. The plan for establishing these new village communities in underdeveloped places was drawn up before the refugees even set foot in Taiwan.⁵⁴ The refugees were neither informed nor consulted on the resettlement plan. In *Seeing like a state*, James Scott provides a powerful critique of top-down, developmental schemes that ignore, homogenize, or eradicate grassroots agency and diversity.⁵⁵ This study offers a mid-twentieth-century example that illustrates the ill effects of such a scheme.

⁵¹Nedostup, ‘Burying, repatriating and leaving the dead’, p. 117.

⁵²For more, see Steven E. Phillips, *Between assimilation and independence: the Taiwanese encounter Nationalist China, 1945–1950* (Stanford, CA, 2003); Evan N. Dawley, *Becoming Taiwanese: ethnogenesis in a colonial city, 1880s to 1950s* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), chs. 6–7.

⁵³For the names, locations, and specific vocations of these villages, see Chen and Chang, ‘Cong Dachen yibao dao Dachenren’, p. 92.

⁵⁴CIECD, ‘Dachen yibao anzhi’, 36-18-004-039, p. 540.

⁵⁵James C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven, CT, 1998).

The village projects looked good on paper. They made sense to developmentalist-minded administrators who looked at things from their comfy Taipei offices, and from the cost-benefit perspective of the state. The Americans, who relied on county-level officials in Taiwan to carry out the actual Dacheng assistance work, did not oppose it. Initially, there had been some difficulties in obtaining land, labour, and materials, which delayed the construction of the new villages.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, by the end of 1956, most of the Dacheng villages had been erected, with the refugees settling in. The government loans and subsidies were distributed; the vocational training programmes also got under way. The village residents were somewhat satisfied at the beginning.

Unfortunately, many soon discovered that they had trouble making a living when the initial state subsidies ran out. The fact of the matter is that, no matter how hard the Dacheng refugees tried, it was impossible to make the new villages economically viable. The wartime developmentalist logic of the KMT placed the Dacheng communities in underdeveloped and sparsely populated areas with the hope that the refugees could become productive agents for the state to open up these places. Yet the Dacheng villages and production units – commercial fishing communities, handicraft production factories, small business co-operatives, and farming settlements – struggled to make ends meet. They could not become self-sustaining in localities with no markets and no travel infrastructure to transport the products. Furthermore, the Taiwanese peasants and fishermen who inhabited the backcountry were indifferent or overtly hostile to the Dacheng refugees, seeing them either as agents of KMT state colonialism or as economic competition for the scarce local resources. The basic concept of the Nationalist resettlement scheme set the refugees up for failure.

Facing difficult circumstances, the Dacheng migrants did not settle for being passive victims for the government relief agents to push around. As they did on the treacherous Zhejiang front line, families found ways to survive. People left their new villages to search for employment in ports and cities.⁵⁷ They also learned and adapted. For example, the depth of the sea and the marine ecosystems were totally different around Taiwan and Zhejiang. The Dacheng migrants thus required training in the local fishing techniques before they could be sent out to sea on their new boats purchased with American funds. Oddly, this was something that the Nationalist vocational training programme failed to provide, which speaks to the overall mismanagement of the Dacheng relief project. Lack of training and experience led to considerable hardship and deprivation in the new fishing villages as Dacheng boats returned to port with empty nets. Fortunately, the migrants were able to observe local vessels operating at sea and learned to imitate the Taiwanese fishermen. Their lives improved after they obtained the necessary skills.⁵⁸

⁵⁶CIECD, 'Dacheng yibao zhuzhai xingjian jihua' ('The community housing construction project for the Dacheng righteous compatriots'), 1955–63, IMHA, 36-18-004-045, pp. 240–1; Ho, 'Dacheng guo Taiwan', pp. 81, 88.

⁵⁷Liu Wen-hsin, 'Taitung Fugang xincun Dacheng yibao shenghuo fangshi di bianqian' ('The changing lifestyle of Dacheng righteous compatriots in Taitung's Fugang new village'), *Taitung wenxian* (*Taitung Documents*), 5 (1999), pp. 4–25, at pp. 15–16.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

The refugees also petitioned and took collective actions. In a sense, the Dachen villages became sites of ‘refugee polis’ analogous to the refugee township of Faridabad described by Dasgupta and the Bengali refugee camps and settlements investigated by Banerjee in their respective articles – places where refugee agency and collaborative efforts manifested themselves. When the state-sponsored Dachen handicraft project ran into difficulties, the refugees in these villages submitted a petition letter to both Nationalist and American officials, voicing their shared opinions and concerns.⁵⁹ Their suggestions fell on deaf ears, however. At this early stage, many of the refugee requests and feedback were simply ignored. Fed up with the delay, and feeling anxious about their future, the Dachen workers rose up to protest violently. They occupied factories, beat up assistance staff, and destroyed finished products. Local security forces had to be called in to restore order in the handicraft villages. Several ‘ringleaders’ among the protesters were arrested and punished.⁶⁰

The incident was an embarrassment to the KMT. The selfless and patriotic ‘righteous’ compatriots’ had rebelled against the benevolent state that had previously rescued them from the shackles of communism. Luckily, the remoteness of the villages kept the news from reaching the general public. But how had this happened? After these unhappy events, the Nationalists showed more willingness to listen. There were attempts by the relief staff to restart smaller handicraft projects with input and collaboration from the refugees.⁶¹ Nevertheless, due to the location of the villages and the structural limitations explained above, these efforts were not very successful.

The Dachen migrants would continue to protest. They submitted a considerable number of petitions to the KMT authorities asking for employment, for exemptions from paying back government loans, and for additional assistance throughout the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. The refugees continued this action to the point where low-level civil servants who had to receive the complaints became weary and resentful of the ‘righteous compatriots’.⁶² In closed-door meetings, the officials spoke disparagingly of the Dachen islanders, whom they thought had developed an unhealthy ‘dependent mentality’ on government handouts, arguing that this was why many of the refugees could not escape from their dire circumstances.⁶³ This thinking demonstrates prejudice and condescension on the part of the Nationalist authorities towards the uneducated Zhejiang islanders, and an attempt by officials to place some of the blame on the refugees’ ignorance and laziness for the failure of the Nationalist–American joint relief effort.

More importantly, what we observe here is how the supposedly unsophisticated and relatively powerless Zhejiang fishing folk leveraged their status of ‘righteous compatriots’ and used it to exert influence – putting pressure on state officials to

⁵⁹See the petition letter in CIECD, ‘Dachen yibao shougongye jihua’ (‘Dachen righteous compatriots handicraft industry plan’), 1955–8, IMHA, 36-18-004-043, pp. 343–5.

⁶⁰CIECD, ‘Dachen yibao anzhi’, 36-18-004-039, p. 55.

⁶¹For example, see CIECD, ‘Dachen yibao shougongye jihua’, 36-18-004-044, p. 279.

⁶²Xingzhengyuan, ‘Gaishan Dachen yibao shenghuo ji jiuye fudao jihuaan’ (‘The plan for improving the life and employment of Dachen righteous compatriots’), NAA, AA00000000A/0053/3-8-1-2/6/0001, pp. 22–3.

⁶³Ibid., p. 23; Xingzhengyuan, ‘Gaishan Dachen yibao shenghuo ji jiuye fudao jihuaan’, NAA, AA00000000A/0053/3-8-1-2/6/0002, p. 197.

improve their lives. After all, they were the model anti-communist citizens singled out and praised by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the supreme leader of the KMT. The failure of the Dachen relief effort reflected badly on the Nationalist Cold War discourse of a prosperous 'Free China' that attracted a large number of destitute people escaping communism. Thus, the actions of the Dachen migrants embodied a form of 'the refugee political' proposed by Banerjee and von Lingen. Though their petitions did not lift most refugee families out of abject poverty in the late 1950s and early '60s, as we will see in the next section, these actions would bear fruit in the subsequent period.

V

In the mid-1960s, the now septuagenarian Chiang Kai-shek learned about the plight of Dachen migrants. The Nationalist dictator ordered something to be done immediately.⁶⁴ Work teams were sent down to the countryside to investigate the conditions of the Dachen villages. This second government assistance effort was a direct result of the continuous protesting and petitioning by the refugees themselves. Most of the refugees thought that they were not given proper aid, something that was promised by the KMT government, by President Chiang himself. The Dachen people submitted numerous petitions reporting on their dire circumstances. As time went on, the local county authorities could no longer hide the fact that the state-sponsored resettlement scheme was a complete failure.

By the mid-1960s, the US officials had washed their hands of the issue and refused to provide further financial support. Most of the aid and vocational projects had stopped. A majority of the migrant families still had a hard time eking out a living. Their deprivation and pathetic existence constituted an embarrassment for the Nationalist authorities, and the migrants were very vocal about their hardship.

The Nationalists thus began the so-called 'second assistance' (第二次輔導) programme for the Dachen migrants.⁶⁵ This time, without the support of American money, the main objective was to find practical solutions to refugee employment, so officials were more willing to listen to petitions and suggestions from the refugees instead of treating them as ignorant country bumpkins or chess pieces to move around for the benefit of the state. The Nationalists had abandoned the wartime developmentalist thinking.

The numbers of Dachen migrants were small, and their overall impact on the local Taiwanese economy and society was minuscule. Under normal circumstances, there would have been no need for an authoritarian regime to do anything for them. However, the migrants' disproportionate weight in the regime's Cold War propaganda, coupled with the refugees' ability to leverage their special status through their petitions and activism, necessitated the state taking actions to improve their lives.

It remains unclear who first proposed the professional seamen training programme for the Dachen people, a programme that vastly improved the economic

⁶⁴Chou, *Cijin de Dachen xincun*, p. 95.

⁶⁵Ho, 'Dachen guo Taiwan', pp. 131–2; Xingzhengyuan, 'Gaishan Dachen yibao', NAA, AA00000000A/0053/3-8-1-2/6/0001, pp. 4–6.

well-being of average migrant households and fundamentally altered the lives of many refugee families. An oral history account suggests that the proposal came from a Nationalist Legislative Yuan (parliament) member. This official employed a Dachen maid. He thus received firsthand information not only about the plight of the refugees but also, and more importantly, about what these seafaring people really wanted to do and what they were actually good at.⁶⁶ The role played by this politician aside, it is important to recognize that persistent refugee activism also played a critical role in introducing the idea to this politician and other power-holders.⁶⁷

A considerable number of Dachen men had left their families and villages by the early 1960s to take up jobs as longshoremen or labourers on fishing trawlers in port cities such as Kaohsiung and Keelung.⁶⁸ Taiwan's industrial capacity and foreign trade was expanding rapidly at the time. Those who worked in the harbour towns knew that significant numbers of well-paid positions were available aboard international shipping vessels. A major obstacle stood in the way of the Dachen folks though, as a seamanship degree and a professional licence were needed for the work. The maritime colleges in Taiwan accepted only young students with a middle school diploma.⁶⁹ Dachen candidates were too old, and most did not have middle school education.

In 1967, upon receiving repeated petitions from the refugees, the Nationalist government set up a fast-track professional seamen training programme designed exclusively for the Dachen candidates. The programme removed both the age limit and the minimum educational requirement.⁷⁰ In the following decade, more than 3,000 Dachen men were trained and licensed as professional seamen. Thereafter, they found good employment in international shipping.⁷¹ At the time, the monthly salary of sailors working on transcontinental commercial vessels ranged from US\$100 to US\$300, depending on one's experience and rank. This amount, even at the lower end, constituted a small fortune for the average working-class households in Taiwan, not to mention the destitute Dachen families. Many seamen were able to send one third or even half of their monthly pay home.⁷² Thus, in a year or two, the economic conditions of Dachen communities in Taiwan improved tremendously, though families had to endure long periods of separation as the men were often away from home (Figures 2 and 3).

Starting in the mid-1970s, an increasing number of Dachen deckhands began to abandon their ships and took up illegal residence in America. In 1979, when border control and travel restrictions in 'Free China' were relaxed, the seamen's families and relatives in Taiwan started to apply for tourist visas en masse. They entered the United States in droves to join their kin and friends already working in the country

⁶⁶Wang, *Dachenren zai Taiwan*, pp. 209–10.

⁶⁷See the petition letters in Xingzhengyuan, 'Gaishan Dachen yibao', NAA, AA00000000A/0053/3-8-1-2/6/0005; Chou, *Cijin de Dachen xincun*, p. 167.

⁶⁸Chou, *Cijin de Dachen xincun*, pp. 96–9. See also the documents in Xingzhengyuan, 'Gaishan Dachen yibao', NAA, AA00000000A/0053/3-8-1-2/6/0004.

⁶⁹Chen, Ma, and Lin, 'Cong dachen dao Taiwan', p. 119.

⁷⁰Xingzhengyuan, 'Gaishan Dachen yibao', NAA, AA00000000A/0053/3-8-1-2/6/0005; Chou, *Cijin de Dachen xincun*, pp. 167–8.

⁷¹Chen and Chang, 'Cong Dachen yibao dao Dachenren', p. 75.

⁷²Ho, 'Dachen guo Taiwan', p. 136.



Figure 2. A narrow alleyway of the Dachen Wuhe New Village in Yonghe District, New Taipei City. Photographed by the author.

illegally.⁷³ The reason was that enterprising Dachen migrants had now discovered a much more lucrative form of employment: as dishwashers and cooks in America's flourishing Chinatown restaurants. One could easily make US\$400–550 a month as a

⁷³Chou, *Cijin de Dachen xincun*, p. 16; Chen and Chang, 'Cong Dachen yibao dao Dachenren', p. 75.



Figure 3. A temple dedicated to the worship of Chiang Kai-shek, built by Dachen residents in the seaside Cijin district, Kaohsiung City. Photographed by the author.

lowly dishwasher and as much as US\$1,000–1,600 working as a cook.⁷⁴ The refugees from coastal Zhejiang had found their version of the ‘Gold Mountain’.

Dachen folks called this illegal immigration ‘jumping ship’ (跳船). The phenomenon became so widespread that shipping corporations stopped hiring Dachen sailors or stopped putting them on container vessels bound for the United States.⁷⁵ The US embassy in Taiwan blacklisted the entire Dachen community for visa applications.⁷⁶ In response, the shrewd migrants resorted to other illegal means to enter the land of opportunity. They produced fake travel documents, took flights from third countries, assumed another person’s identity, and so on.⁷⁷

The life of illegal immigrants in the United States was harsh, not only physically but also mentally. Like other undocumented migrants, Dachen islanders lived in constant fear of arrest and deportation. Racism, homesickness, and family separation aside, many of those who had recently arrived were subjected to dreadful living and working conditions. They were exploited by fellow Dachen migrants and other ethnic Chinese American communities. Even under these circumstances, they

⁷⁴Ho, ‘Dachen guo Taiwan’, p. 137.

⁷⁵Hsu Chih-fu and Tien Lan-ling, ‘Huang Ho-sheng xiansheng fangtanlu’ (‘The interview records of Mr Huang Ho-sheng’), *Yilan wenxian*, 30 (1997), pp. 145–57, at p. 154; Chou, *Cijin de Dachen xincun*, p. 170.

⁷⁶Wang, *Dachenren zai Taiwan*, pp. 207–8.

⁷⁷Chou, *Cijin de Dachen xincun*, pp. 179–85.

worked extremely hard, put up with the abuse, and seldom complained.⁷⁸ Many saved up enough money to open their own restaurants and small businesses. They put their children (and sometimes themselves) through universities and graduate schools.

Tao Chung-liang was one of the co-founders of the Dachen Native Place Association in America. He jumped ship in New York in 1972 to work as a dishwasher in a Chinatown restaurant. Even though he was careful, however, he was unlucky. In 1974, he was seized and sent back to Taiwan when his apartment was raided by US immigration officials. It took Tao another five years to sneak back into the US to start over again.⁷⁹

Tsao Hsiang-yan was fourteen years old when the KMT evacuated his family to Taiwan. Like other refugee families, the Tsaos had fallen on hard times in their new village. In 1979, Tsao jumped ship. He later found work as a cook in a Chinese restaurant in Rapid City, South Dakota. One day, a plainclothes agent suddenly barged in and started handcuffing his fellow workers. Seeing this in the back kitchen, Tsao immediately dashed out of the room and escaped through a backdoor. He ran into the cold winter night wearing only a T-shirt. He returned the next day to collect his stuff and find new employment elsewhere. After playing the hide-and-seek game with the authorities for a number of years, he eventually acquired citizenship and saved enough money to open his own restaurant. Not only that, he supported his three children through college in the United States. In the early 2000s, at the age of sixty, Tsao sold his business and properties in America and migrated back to Taiwan with his wife to spend his retirement years with fellow Dachen natives.⁸⁰

Yan Cheng-te was twenty-six years old when he jumped ship in Baltimore. He worked sixteen hours a day in a New York City restaurant. As a result, it took him only five years to gain enough experience and capital to open his own business. Yan was forced to sell his restaurant, however, when New York City officials and police increased raids and crackdowns on Chinese restaurants, and he had to find another source of income. Having worked as a tailoring apprentice in Taiwan at the tender age of thirteen to support his family, he was interested in clothing and fashion design. Through hard work and persistence, he improved his English, earned a high school diploma, and then gained a degree from the Fashion Institute of Technology at the State University of New York. Yan became a successful pattern designer and put his two children through college. He spent his retirement living between Taiwan and the United States.⁸¹

These are only a few examples of the refugee 'success stories', as the humble islanders from coastal Zhejiang have certainly come a long way. Historiographies of the Cold War, refugee studies, and even research on Chinese Americans also have a long way to go. Many unknown refugee stories, such as the ones presented in this article, remain to be explored.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 180.

⁷⁹Wang, *Dachenren zai Taiwan*, p. 320.

⁸⁰Ibid., pp. 260–2.

⁸¹Ibid., pp. 322–4.

VI

The story of Dachen migrants illustrates the instrumental role played by refugees in how a Cold War regime-in-exile defined model citizenship and exercised state building. Chiang Kai-shek's government in Taiwan held up the Zhejiang evacuees as 'righteous compatriots' in its rhetorical war for territorial sovereignty and political legitimacy against Communist China. The Nationalist wartime developmentalist logic utilized these displaced people as human resources to colonize and open up backwater regions of Taiwan, but their top-down resettlement scheme failed miserably, despite financial support provided by the United States. Instead of suffering in silence, the Dachen migrants leveraged their special status as the 'righteous compatriots' to protest, petition, and pressure the government to listen to their needs and improve their lives. They were the unsung heroes in their own salvation and economic success. This study has underscored the power of refugee voices and actions against the state that created them, utilized them, and exploited them – 'the refugee political' – and it has illuminated the concept of the refugee polis, where the Dachen new villages became sites of agitation, collaboration, and solidarity. All in all, the Dachen story serves as a testament to what Banerjee and von Lingen have argued in the introduction to this special issue: 'Refugees were not an accident of twentieth-century history, but the necessary dialectical mediation between imperial state sovereignty and national state sovereignty, between colonial regimes of violence and postcolonial ones.'

Competing interests. The author declares none.